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ABSTRACT

The evolutionary work world of today is placing continuous change on career professionals and clients. Discussing different perspectives on the transition process is helpful for clients. This paper presents a case study that contains an experiential exercise and discussion about managing workplace change. The case study and questions provide an experiential framework for participants to identify their strengths and preferred approach to this type of change. Models can provide a useful tool throughout the change process. (JDM)

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by
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Surviving or Thriving?

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Career professionals deal with clients on a daily basis who are coping with organizational changes that often leave them feeling surprised and out-of-control. Change can be stressful, but can also provide us with growth and renewal if we can deal with the emotional discomfort and identify potential opportunities in the process. There is always some choice during the change process, but individuals must be open in order to envision possibilities. It is dangerous to judge change based on our fear of loss and doing so prevents us from experiencing what might be gained. By looking at the possibilities during the time of change one can see the opportunity to thrive, not just survive!

Discussing different perspectives on the transition process is helpful for clients we serve. Career development professionals may also benefit from thinking about the way change affects their professional and personal lives. The business world often changes at a more rapid rate than non-profit or educational settings. However, few of us are not affected in some way by today's evolutionary work world. When transition does knock either by choice or necessity we want to thrive and not merely survive. Hopefully, the following discussion will provide helpful insights into how to process and move through change.

Following is a case study that begins an experiential exercise and discussion about managing workplace change. Put yourself in this situation as you read. Following the case there will be questions to answer.

Case Study

Between 1990 and 1998 the staff of a centralized career services department at a private liberal arts university had experienced stability and a positive working environment. The career staff consisted of seven professional members and five support staff that felt valued and respected as professionals.

Unexpectedly, in the late summer of '98 the well-respected director of Career Services gave a two-week notice that he was leaving the university. An internal staff member in Student Affairs with additional full-time responsibilities was appointed interim director. He held a strong background in personal counseling and some experience in the career field. The director's work was redistributed amongst all staff members for the year and basic services were maintained. Tentative plans were made to do a national search in the spring of '99. Career staff members were asked to review and rewrite the director's job description. They completed this task,

including mapping out a plan for a hiring timeline, suggesting publication recommendations for advertising, and researching upcoming conference placement centers for recruitment.

Simultaneously, the university was expanding to another geographic location. Career staff members were told that they would need to provide a minimum of 40 hours of staffing for that site. The staff made recommendations on ways to get the work accomplished while maintaining the existing organizational structure. Those recommendations were not accepted and in the summer of '99 three full-time career staff members were relocated to another campus location. The interim, acting director was also assigned additional duties to oversee the development of the new center. Staff members disagreed with the decision, but there was no recourse. Messages were mixed and unclear regarding direction and organizational structure. Staff was described in diagnostic and negative terms. Staff felt their work was criticized unfairly and office moral was low. The office that once had twelve employees was reduced to a staff of four due to reorganization and job changes.

In the spring of '99 an assistant director's position was created. An internal career staff member was appointed into this position. There continued to be no word on the candidate search process for the director position. The following year brought heightened tension regarding lack of staffing, unclear communication regarding direction, and lack of a solid organizational structure for the department. Spring 2000 once again brought changes for the staff. The interim director was moved into a full-time position in the new campus location while the assistant director was assigned to acting director. Two new staff positions were approved. An Employer Relations Specialist and Technical Support Specialist were hired late in the year.

Technology advancements were a positive focus for some team members during the transition phase. A comprehensive web site was developed. Software packages were purchased and implemented to electronically streamline career development resources and on-campus interviewing.

Questions

What is the main issue that needs to be addressed in the case study?

How would you feel as a staff member?

What information would you want in order to manage this situation?

Where would you put your energy in this situation?

What framework would you put into place to manage this situation?

How did you arrive at your answer to the previous question?

The case study is a short summary of what our Career Services Office did experience. There were some very positive outcomes and most staff members successfully adapted to changing roles. We've learned from our transition and can use that knowledge to the benefit of those we serve.

The case study and questions provide an experiential framework for participants to identify their strengths and preferred approach to this type of change. It is an opportunity to utilize an individual's expertise and personalize the process. As in narrative career counseling, we aren't looking at an assessment to validate our direction. Models and theories can provide a useful framework to use as tools throughout the change process.

William Bridges' stages of transition were helpful as our office moved through several changes.

In his book, *Transitions*, he describes three parts to any transition: endings, the neutral zone and beginnings. The model states that we need to experience all stages if we are to truly experience transition. When we introduced the Bridges' model at a staff meeting it created the space for staff members to openly share their remorse for the changes they were experiencing. It became clear that we were not all at the same point in the change process. Some staff members were ready to explore new possibilities while others were grieving and angry. The model gave us common ground to communicate and permission to be at different points. This was probably the beginning of the healing we so badly needed. We needed the endings, but first had to acknowledge common, as well as individual losses.

It was difficult for our office to let go of relationships and the ways we had worked because we were extremely successful in previous years. The history of the center and staff members that had played significant roles deserved respect. One thing we did to move from endings into new beginnings was to videotape and watch interviews with past directors. This helped us pause and acknowledge the past. The messages they shared about the creation and development of the center clarified for the staff the importance of the work being done. It also allowed us to identify common and valued themes that others had begun and we chose to continue.

There was a lot of work to be done in our office during our transition. We hung on to the services that were basic and focused on our students. We tried some new things like a "Career Expo" for our students. A couple of the staff members put energy into developing technology for the department because we determined that was a priority. The use of technology could provide some of the resource sharing services to alleviate high demand for counselor appointment times. Some work fell by the wayside like maintenance of our Career Resource Center. It was a conscious decision that we could drop that area for a year. All of the staff had to be engaged or the work would not have gotten done. We worked hard. Some of the transitional structure stayed in place and some of it was discontinued. There wasn't clarity as to when we were in the beginning or when we were ending something. People tried things out of their comfort zone. Staff knew each other well and liked one another, which smoothed the path for a part of the transition. We laughed together and stayed respectful under stress.

Myers-Briggs Types played out during the transition process. Some staff members were off to the next phase, while others held back questioning the motives and reasons for change. There were also the people who kept the day-to-day business going, making sure nothing fell between the cracks. Others were more reflective in the process and took time to stand back and assess the situation. Types gave our group common language to recognize and discuss differences without it becoming personally charged. As noted in the opening paragraph, a time a change often brings stress. Stress is one of the four factors that causes us to fall into the grip of one's inferior

function as noted in, *In the Grip: Our Hidden Personality*. When stress occurs it drains our conscious energy resources and then unconscious parts of one's personality become energized to take over. We had used *MBTI Type* dynamics for each staff member previously, but this shed a new light on using type during a time of change and stress. With the use of the *In the Grip* resource we were able to identify what our triggers were for provoking the inferior function, how our own type manifests when in the unconscious, and ways of returning to equilibrium. It became easier to understand why behaviors or reactions were occurring for individuals or as a group that we had not previously seen or experienced through the good years.

Models and theories gave our staff a context for change, provided some new ideas and normalized experiences. We were trying to find equilibrium when it felt like there was nothing to hang on to. Real change is a very personal and individual process. It's not easy. Some people jump into new things, while others crawl. Growing into it is perhaps the easiest way and yet we may have to leap if it is in our best interest. With luck we get a little help from friends, maybe some valuable input from professionals, read a good book, or try things in a new way that moves us forward. Life experience helps. Time helps.

As professionals we have skills and theories when it comes to facilitating change. However, this is always more difficult when it is a personal situation. Like so many clients, our staff was experiencing changes in their work life and their personal lives. Outside of work there were things happening like; difficult health issues, divorce, dogs dying, turning 40 and 50, aging parent's issues and numerous child-rearing events. Work cultures have different levels of tolerance for our personal lives especially during times of transition. We maintained support for the personal lives of staff members during our change because of a strong value system in place.

Most people hope to thrive. Focusing on what we really want out of life is a huge part of thriving and maybe the most complicated. Often times we aren't sure what we want. Sometimes it changes without our being conscious of it. If we know what we really want, we can sort through all the information coming at us during transition and determine if possibilities exist to get what we want in the given situation or not. The majority of staff members stayed through the transition, but a couple did leave because they were dissatisfied with what had happened. Some who stayed will always think of the past as better than now.

People beginning careers in or out of educational institutions are often wonderfully idealist about their professions and how the world works in general. Hopefully, we maintain at least a portion of our idealism and hope for better things. We also learn that there are many good agendas for accomplishing work and various methods available to meet our intended goals. Whether we agree with them or not there are many different ways of serving student and client needs. When we're in the throws of transition some of these different ways of working may clash, but this can be a growth point when we may feel forced out of the box.

The last few years there has been discussion that the typical career assessments that served us so well no longer fit for many students and clients we serve. They come to us with such a wide variety of experiences and backgrounds and so much diversity that it is more helpful to make the client the expert. Career counselors might better serve clients in transition by exploring their world through a story approach (Brott, 2001). This approach involves the client and counselor in

a collaborative relationship to create and reconstruct career and life stories. Our career services office successfully reconstructed our work story to fit a changing university and environment.

I recently worked with a female sophomore student who was under great stress about choosing a major. She was definitely in a much more difficult spot than the majority of her peers. I wondered why. The only hints I got were that she was a high achiever and that success had come easily to her. She was looking for the “right” answer and a guarantee that she would be happy while pursuing her major and get a good job after graduating. Her hope was that someone would tell her what to do. At one point I experienced her anger because I wouldn’t meet her expectation. We sat with her anger awhile. The basis was fear of the unknown. We discussed that. This felt like the most important decision she had ever made and she was very afraid she would blow it.

Students are experiencing transition on many levels. Living conditions sometimes change annually, values and ideas are change, friends change, family relationships change, part-time jobs change, classes change, economies change and schedules change. Education costs a lot and the stakes are high. Students live in an in between world that lasts four or five years. Time is spent studying and preparing for the big transition into the world of work. They are becoming adult and responsible for making life decisions which they hope will work for them long term. They hope to thrive. The ambiguity and uncertainty can be uncomfortable.

There are few guarantees but one of them is that we will all experience change in our life times. Each of us can benefit from gaining understanding of the transition process. We can learn to manage change and look beyond merely surviving. As we become more comfortable with the process and more knowledgeable of our own transition style, we will have more to offer our students and clients.

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